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ABSTRACT

In response to a recent wave of reports by Goodlad and his colleagues on their study of teacher educators, this study suggests that there are research questions to be asked of teacher education that go beyond the programmatic level. Using one teacher's teaching as an example, the document explores some of the aspects of this teacher's students' knowledge and beliefs about teaching that make educating educators difficult work. (Author/JD)

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The Secret Garden of Teacher Education

Suzanne M. Wilson

NCRTE

National
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THE SECRET GARDEN OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Suzanne M. Wilson

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Abstract

In response to a recent wave of reports by Goodlad and his colleagues on their study of teacher educators, the author suggests that there are research questions to be asked of teacher education that go beyond the programmatic level. Using her own teaching as an example, the author explores some of the aspects of her students' knowledge and beliefs that make educating educators difficult work.

THE SECRET GARDEN OF TEACHER EDUCATION[1]

Suzanne M. Wilson[2]

> *It was the sweetest, most mysterious-looking place any one could imagine. The high walls which shut it in were covered with the leafless stems of climbing roses which were so thick that they were matted together. . . . It was this hazy tangle from tree to tree which made it all look so mysterious. Mary had thought it must be different from other gardens which had not been left all by themselves so long; and indeed it was different from any other place she had ever seen in her life. (Burnett, 1962, pp. 71-72)*

I know how Mary felt when she discovered her secret garden at the manor, at once overwhelmed with its dormant beauty and its rampant disrepair. As each new term begins and I face another set of prospective teachers, simultaneously I am excited by their promise and distressed about their ignorance. I can see roses and lilacs and lilies in my classroom--buds that could blossom into beautiful and vibrant teaching. But I also see some weeds and vines--selected beliefs about teaching and learning, planted and watered throughout years in classrooms, that could choke that promising teaching. Each prospective teacher in my class is but a piece of the garden I tend as a teacher educator, a plot of land populated with both flowers and vines, needing watering and weeding.

As a novice teacher educator, the recent wave of reports and articles about teacher education are important to me. When I was a first-year high school teacher, I asked the older, more experienced teachers to share their wisdom with me, to help me learn how to do the work of teaching. In much the same way, I now look to the accumulated wisdom of teacher educators and researchers of teacher education for assistance. But the recent articles in *Phi Delta Kappan* are not particularly helpful to me. Most of the authors and researchers seem more interested in examining questions on a programmatic level rather than examining issues on a teacher learning level. What does it *mean* to learn to teach? What does it *mean* to have a field experience? What does it *mean* to learn about learning? I've read a lot about the courses and experiences that typically comprise teacher education (Engle, 1989; Goodlad, 1988; Soder, 1988; Sirotnik 1988; Travers and Sacks, 1989). But no one is telling me about what happens behind the doors of those classes, about the *ideas* of

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[1]This paper will appear as an article in *Phi Delta Kappan*.

[2]Suzanne Wilson, assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, is a senior researcher with the National Center for Research on Teacher Education.

teacher education, about the *pedagogy* of teacher education. Thus the garden remains a secret.

Don't get me wrong. I think it's helpful to describe teacher education from afar: Any characterization of the broad array of programs, the combinations of field experiences, liberal arts classes, and professional education courses that constitute teacher preparation nationwide helps me situate my work. It's equally important, however, to talk about the content and pedagogy of those experiences, classes, programs. I know full well that the field experiences students have under my supervision are different from those who work with other colleagues--whether they work at Michigan State, at Illinois State, at Stanford.[3] Discussions on a programmatic level are not fine-grained enough to get at these potentially significant differences. What, I might ask, are students thinking, feeling, learning, believing, saying in those different kinds of field experiences? Alternatively, how are they changing or not changing in different kinds of educational psychology courses?

In this essay then I invite you inside of my garden for a bit, to take a walk with me through some of the tangles I encounter. The stroll is intended to highlight the importance of research that examines questions of teacher learning as one examines the education of educators, in addition to the views being provided by Goodlad and his colleagues in their Study of the Education of Educators (Goodlad, 1985).

Exploring Teaching

I teach a class called Teacher Education 101. If researchers wanted to label it as a "type" of teacher education class, they would call it an introduction to teaching. In the class we discuss three questions: What is teaching? What is the relationship between teaching and learning? What do teachers need to know? The purpose of the class is to help prospective teachers question their beliefs about teaching, learning, and schooling by asking them seemingly simple questions that have no simple answers.[4]

Most students want to waive the course. They've all met and worked with lots of teachers, helped friends with assignments, taught Sunday school. Many have parents who are teachers. Explore teaching? Be introduced to teaching? What a perfectly ridiculous idea! My students presume to know a great deal about teachers and teaching. They're advanced beginners, well beyond any bunny slope course labelled TE 101!

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[3]I use these three schools as examples to indicate the range of my experiences as a new teacher educator. I teach at Michigan State University, I lead a research team that is examining teacher education at Illinois State University over a three year period, and I was an apprentice teacher educator in the Stanford Teacher Education Program as a graduate student.

[4]Exploring Teaching, otherwise known as TE 101, is a course that is taught at Michigan State University. It is an introductory course that is intended to help prospective students begin to think deeply about the nature of teaching, learning, and schooling. Teacher educators, including Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Deborah Ball, Susan Melnick, Michelle Parker, Susan McMahon, Linda Tiezzi, Susan Florio-Ruane, Tim Little, Bruce Cheney, G. Williamson McDiarmid, Helen Featherstone, John Zeuli, and Doug McIsaac have contributed to its iterative conceptualization and development.

They're right. As students and parents and babysitters and friends, they *have* learned a lot about teaching. But my course is designed to make them reconsider what they know and believe. I want to help them consider teaching not from the perspective of what it *looks like* but rather from the vantage point of what it requires and involves.

We start with the first question: What is teaching? Some students respond by claiming that a teacher is the person with a key to the faculty lounge, a briefcase, and a credential. Others believe that teachers are information dispensers. Still others believe that teachers help people learn things. Often, the same student will hold multiple, sometimes conflicting beliefs about teaching and teachers. My job is to help them find ways to examine their beliefs, discard those that are unhelpful or outdated and acquire new ones.

We read a lot, things like Philip Jackson's (1986) "Real Teaching" and Hawkins (1974) "I, Thou, and It." My students find Jackson's discussion of the range of definitions of teaching troubling, circuitous, and confusing. "Perhaps a little like teaching," I suggest. When Hawkins claims that teaching means more than caring for children, that it is both about respect and about teaching people about something, students are taken aback for many of them believe that a fundamental love for children is the only prerequisite for teaching. The idea that respecting students may mean pushing them intellectually instead of coddling them is outlandish, a problem we encounter when I ask them what Hawkins means when he writes, "love can blind and bind."

My pedagogy varies. Many days involve small-group activities in which students share ideas and answer questions that they have generated. We watch videotapes of teachers like Marva Collins, discussing her pedagogy and purposes. We meet in large groups, in pairs; at times we work in solitude. Sometimes I do a lot of talking, sometimes I am but one voice among many, sometimes I say nothing at all. Always I want them to think about teaching--how and why and when it works, what it means, who is in control. One of the ways I try to get inside those ideas is to end class with another question, "Did Suzanne teach today?"

They know it's a trick. On days when I have the strongest voice, the answer is clear. Of course I taught. On days when we see videotapes and answer questions in small groups, I probably taught because I provided the videotapes and the questions. On the days I am mute, there's less agreement. They confront a paradox created by their disparate beliefs. They know I'm the official instructor of the course, the university says so. Does that make me the teacher? They know I didn't *tell* them anything but sometimes they think they've learned something. Did teaching go on because there was learning? But they wrote nothing in their notebooks. What exactly did they learn?

Locating the Roots: Beliefs About Teaching, Learning, and Knowing

What I'm trying to do with my not-so-simple question is to push students to locate beliefs that they have about teaching that are so deeply rooted that they take them entirely for granted. For one, most of my students believe that teaching is telling. The work of teaching, they assume, involves telling and explaining things to pupils. Learning involves absorbing that information. Differences in good and bad teaching are defined by how well that story is told. This does not mean that they think lecturing should be the mainstay of their work. Many of my students will tell you that they believe in active learning, in engaging students in educational experiences--using manipulatives, writing stories, conducting experiments. However, a closer examination of how they talk about these activities reveals that they see them as pleasant methods to make the business of learning more palatable, not as methods that reflect different assumptions about how and why learning takes place, what is to be learned, and what role the teacher plays in the enterprise. No matter what goes on in between, teaching ultimately means that students learn something specific that teachers provide.

This becomes most apparent around mid-term when we watch several videotapes of teachers who encourage students to set, explore, and solve their own problems. As we all know, problem defining and solving are not efficient processes. The videotapes display classroom conversations brimming with false starts, tangential discussions, seemingly endless arguments. Fifteen minutes of students arguing over the meaning of one graph seems an eternity to my students. "She let them go on too long," they remark, "she should have given them five minutes to discuss. After that she should have given them the right answer. There's not enough time for all that talk."

So there are times when my students have difficulty with the question, "Did Suzanne teach today?" because I didn't tell them the right answer. The simulated school-board meeting might have been fun to participate in, but it should have ended with some wise words from me about its significance. The small-group activity about fractions was fun, but I should have made sure they all left class with the same understanding. Instruction can be participatory and active, but learning--real learning--depends on teachers identifying and providing the bottom line.

It's strange. We read many an account that portrays learning as ineffable, hard to measure, something that takes time. In rational, polite class discussions about such things, students agree that learners twist and turn the information they encounter in classrooms in an effort to construct their own meaning. They agree that there exists an array of learning modes and styles and that learning takes time. But when I push them to critique an instance of teaching, or I ask them to plan a lesson, or teach something to the class, they assume that if only teachers would tell their students something in clear, concise prose, then every learner who is motivated will leave the class with the same understanding. Embedded by

years of classroom experience, the beliefs my students hold about teaching as telling are deeply rooted and insidious.

Their beliefs about teaching are tethered to another set of beliefs, assumptions they have about what knowledge is of the most worth. On the days they leave the class more confused than when they entered, did they learn anything? "Probably not," they'll tell me. After all, learning results in propositional knowledge, not fogs of uncertainty and questions. On the days when they worked in small groups or led their own whole-class discussion, they didn't take notes because other students may have interesting things to say, but nothing worth noting--only teachers say things you have to remember. Did they learn anything? "Maybe from each other, but not about the class," they'll respond. On the days when I do say something, but simply pointed to something they already "knew," some students will respond like Joe:

> It is my opinion that to teach is to impart knowledge or skills. Today, in class, two videos were shown and we were asked to take notes so that we would be able to answer specific questions. It was not an exercise in the transmission of knowledge. . . . To answer the question, no you did not teach us today. You provided an exercise but no knowledge was imparted and no skills were passed on to us.

Students envision knowledge about teaching as lists of methods concerning discipline, management, evaluation, and instruction that, once committed to heart and mind, will ensure their success. Knowledge is static and true, not dynamic and interpretive. No one has ever suggested to them, for example, that mathematics is a community of discourse in which scholars address problems dealing with relationships and changes in quantities and space or that the algorithms and theories used by mathematicians are subject to change and refutation. Similarly, no one has ever hinted that teaching might be a similar learning community in which scholars use different kinds of evidence to prove hypotheses, change their minds, reinterpret old claims. Instead, knowledge about teaching or mathematics or biology or history is conclusive, concrete, final. They've never been exposed to the exciting aspects of knowing: refutation, interpretation, construction. No wonder learning is distasteful to many of my students. On the way to the classroom, the very characteristics that make knowledge worth knowing got lost.

Again, these beliefs lead to confusion around the question, "Did Suzanne teach?" Students arrive expecting to learn a set of recipes that will make them good teachers. I don't believe that knowledge of teaching exists in such form. Rather, I believe that knowledge of teaching takes the form of stories and experiences, parables and principles, tentative claims about what works sometimes in some contexts. So, "Yes, Suzanne taught

today," might be their response, "but she didn't teach us important stuff. She didn't teach us how to teach. She taught us how to think differently."

The beliefs students have about teaching, learning, and knowing don't only pop up in their answers. They also surface in behavior. Polite and dependable, hardworking and sincere, concerned and obedient, my learners are model students.[5] They raise their hands when they want to speak, they do the readings and take copious notes on what the authors said, they come to class prepared. The difficulty is that they believe that that's what school is all about--obedience and politeness and respect for the teacher, the one with the goods.

I find the politeness in my class oppressive. It doesn't facilitate learning and discussion, it strangles it. If I ask a question about one of the readings and it's the beginning of the term, the conversation goes something like this:

Suzanne: What does Oakes think the purpose of schooling is?

Student: To educate everyone equally.

Suzanne: What does that mean?

Student: [silence]

Suzanne: Can anyone help her out?

Student: I thought she answered your question.

Suzanne: What does she mean by "equally"?

Student: Equal.

My students want to answer my questions. But they've never been asked to justify their answers, to explain their reasons, to define their terms. When I ask them "Why do you believe that?" they're taken aback. They speak of the "W" word (Why?) with trepidation. When I push them to support or unpack their answers, I violate the classroom code. In fact, I'm being rude. I'm making them think about their answers. I'm making their brains hurt. They feel anxious, uncomfortable, insecure. This kind of classroom discourse is unfamiliar. They're not used to being pushed intellectually; they're not used to being asked to defend

[5]As is the case at many large, public universities, the number of students who want to be teachers far exceeds the resources available to teach them at Michigan State. Consequently, we have capped admissions to the College of Education, using proxies of academic achievement like grade point averages for admittance to the programs; hence, entrance to the College is now very competitive. My students are not just well behaved, they also have a history of scholastic achievement and success.

their ideas; they're not used to a teacher demanding that they find and contribute a voice in the class.

I talk with them about their passivity and the expectations they have developed of appropriate school behavior. I ask them if they want their students to act like they do in class--afraid to answer questions, afraid to change assignments to suit their own needs, afraid to raise questions or ask the teacher or a classmate to clarify something that was said. They get even more uncomfortable when I ask them how they are going to teach. "I'm going to teach like my favorite teachers," someone says. I ask, "But did your favorite teachers teach you how to answer my questions, to speak up in class, to have a voice?"

The paradox is obvious: My students have good intentions. They want their pupils to be empowered. Yet they themselves are disenfranchised learners. Confronting this dilemma can be painful for it requires both acknowledging one's own weaknesses and questioning one's past as a learner. I try to dispel the guilt they feel. It's not their fault they're passive, they learned to act that way in classrooms. We taught them to behave in school, but we forgot to teach them how to learn.

I'm not doing my students or my work justice by treating these issues so superficially. My students are not wrong in what they believe about teaching: Teaching does and should involve telling. Teachers are often the source of information. Learning can involve memorizing lists of numbers and words. But to believe that those are the *defining* characteristics of teaching is to ignore its ultimate aim--to help lots of students learn lots of things about themselves and about their world.

My purpose here is neither to draw a complete picture of the beliefs students have that influence and impact how they learn to teach, nor suggest that all of my students' beliefs are dysfunctional. What I do want you to see, however, is that educating educators is a far more complex task than deciding what the best program, course, or experiences will be. Teaching teachers requires thinking about how they learn specific concepts within those courses and across time. It also requires surfacing beliefs they have that may facilitate or inhibit their ability to learn. Once the roots are located though, the work is not over for shaking and uprooting those beliefs takes a lot of time, a little luck, and some wise pedagogy.

Shaking the Roots: The Pedagogy of Teacher Education

I want to teach my students that teaching is hard work--not only because teachers have to manage 30 students at a time and teach a range of subject matters, but also because it requires reflection on one's own knowledge and belief, considering one's actions and their consequences. I want them to learn how to look at themselves. Perhaps I shouldn't have started this essay with the image of prospective teachers as garden plots. Instead, I should

have portrayed them as apprentice gardeners, learning from me how to nurture and weed their own teaching garden, getting rid of the dandelions but nurturing the roses.

In 10 weeks, I can't hope to pull out the deeply rooted beliefs of my students, nor can I teach them to do the same. Those beliefs and behaviors run too deep to uproot them the first time; our weeding must be vigilant. But in one term I can shake them up a little and help them begin to examine their assumptions about learning and teaching. I can also provide a safe environment in which they can begin to act like real learners--challenging and justifying, hypothesizing and experimenting--experiencing (some of them for the first time) the kind of learning that they dream of providing for their students.

Lest you think I've muddied the waters enough already, I'll add one more twist. Teacher educators teach prospective teachers these things on at least two levels. If I am the type of teacher I want them to become, I can't *tell* them these things about teaching and learning and knowing, I have to *teach* them these things. My students learn as much from how I *act* as a teacher as they do from the content I provide. If I want them to understand the nature of pedagogical reasoning, for example, I can describe it but I also have to construct settings in which they engage in such reasoning and begin to develop the necessary skills. Moreover, if I do not model such reasoning, I may be undermining my own intentions. Simultaneously, I have to consider my own beliefs about teaching and learning to teach, in addition to my students' beliefs about teaching and learning to teach. I have to look in my own mirror, a difficult task in itself. Additionally, I have to model that mirror-gazing for my students, letting them watch me watch myself.

It's easy to get lost in quagmires of such concerns and, as a novice, I lack a dexterity and facility in managing multiple concerns and agendas. My success is sporadic. It takes me the entire term just to get students feeling comfortable enough to talk to me and to each other. My students are fragile learners and it's hard for me to know when and how much to push them to think hard about their beliefs. We don't have time for them to voice glib opinions, I want them to construct defensible positions.

When do I know, though, whether I crossed the fine line between teacher and bully (a line I dare say Socrates crossed often enough)? It's scary for them to have a teacher who requires that they voice half-baked notions, that they challenge their own and each other's thinking, that they take control of their own learning. I know it's frustrating to leave class with your notebook empty, especially around mid-terms. Sometimes I think I'm doing more harm than good. Maybe all I do is confuse them.

Every quarter though I think I get better at it. I really am learning how to shake some roots a little loose. For example, another belief that my students hold is that experience will teach them everything they need to know in teaching. I want them to question that assumption for, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, we can have the experience but miss

the meaning. My students find it hard to grasp this idea, but occasionally I can see a belief being reevaluated, a new notion blossoming. Rosemary, for instance, wrote me:

> When I was 13, I had to memorize the 23rd psalm. Up until that point I had watched 13 year olds in the years before me recite the psalm for the congregation in order to receive their Bibles. When it finally came to be my turn to memorize it, I had heard the sounds of the words so many times before that I was comfortable with them and it was easy for me to commit them to memory. I got up in front of the church, recited my verse and received my Bible. What I realize now, six years later, is that I still do not know the meaning or importance of that verse.
>
> In other words, I had the experience with the verse, but still missed the meaning. This is not such a hard thing to do. And when training to teach it is especially easy. Having grown up in classrooms observing teachers all our lives, of course we will have preconceptions of what teaching should look like. But hidden behind those spelling lists and lesson plans is where the essence of teaching lies. This familiarity of classrooms will make us comfortable. . . . But we are only going through motions without knowing why.

Rosemary is beginning to think about herself and her beliefs in ways that may liberate her from teaching the way that she was taught. She may also be learning how to critically evaluate her apprenticeship in those classrooms. But it's only a beginning. Sometimes I get depressed when I realize that I'm moving on to another group, another overgrown garden that I have 10 weeks to prune and weed and water. Who is going to continue to help my Joes and Rosemarys think about their assumptions? One term is little time in comparison to a lifetime of pedestrian teaching and a future in schools that leave little room for the creative and critical thinking that good teaching requires. I'm worried too about the liberal arts and sciences classes (as well as some of the teacher education courses) that my students are going to take in which instructors often model teaching that reaffirms all of the assumptions they have built up over their years of school experience.

Students leave my class drawing one of the following assumptions: (1) Teaching is too hard, so I'm going to switch my major; (2) Suzanne is a quirky, although pleasant enough, person who should be tolerated but largely ignored; (3) Teaching is hard work, and I can't think of a better way to spend my life. I've made the same decision as that third group of students: Educating educators is hard work, but the mysterious nature of the tangle of violets and vines is a challenge worth wrestling.

I began this essay with a concern about the recent discourse on educating educators. I welcome the pictures that researchers are providing of teacher education from an outsider's perspective. But I worry about what they will be able to SEE when they visit for a few days. My concerns are fueled as much by my own participation in such a project, as

they are motivated by my reaction to the results reported thus far.[6] No matter how many hours one accumulates across several days of interviewing and observing faculty in teacher education programs, kamikaze data collection visits are not a reliable proxy for the daily work of teacher education. Short term intensive visits provide one perspective on the education of educators. But the definitive word? Methinks not.

What else is needed? Something teacher educators have been both reluctant and too busy to do: Careful consideration and documentation of their work over time. Just as close examinations of teachers have illuminated our collective understanding of teaching, so might microscopic studies of pedagogy and curriculum in teacher education contribute to our knowledge of the education of educators. There is a secret garden there, a frightening tangle of belief and folklore that lies under the surface of program and course considerations. There's much more to educating educators than what we see when we examine the surface structure of programs and experiences. So while I applaud the efforts of researchers to examine teacher education, I also implore them to dig deeper. This garden, like the one at Misselthwaite Manor, has gone unattended much too long.

[6]I participate in a research project in the National Center for Research on Teacher Education that involves interviewing and observing teacher educators at sites across the country. My experiences collecting data at Illinois State University have taught me how little I know about that teacher education program, even after collecting data for three years.

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